RPG Reload File 087 – 'Chaos Rings 2'

July 21, 2016 by Shaun Musgrave

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where heroes might be gone, but are never forgotten. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up in the here and now. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their position in the overall tapestry, or simply to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow. I try to choose a balanced plate of RPGs from week to week in order to represent the diverse nature of the genre, but if you feel like I'm missing anything important, please let me know. You can do that by commenting below the article, posting in [the Official RPG Reload Club thread in the forums](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). Your suggestion might not appear soon, but it will be added to the master list.

As regular readers know, I plan the schedule for the **RPG Reload** well in

advance. It's one of the only ways it's possible for me to actually get all of these games done on time. To be honest, it's a bit of a gamble thanks to the way iOS and the App Store work. I've had to reschedule Reloads on numerous occasions, and we even had one unlucky case where the featured game was pulled literally in the one day span between my turning in the finished article and it being posted. There are lots of games I would have loved to have done a Reload on, had they remained available. Around one month ago, I was again put in the position of having to choose between covering a pulled game or doing a last-minute reschedule. Ultimately, I've decided the game is important enough to merit the article even though it no longer works on the current version of iOS and likely will never be made available for purchase on the platform again.

Chaos Rings 2 was one of the many casualties of Square Enix's major house-cleaning of May 2016. Up until then, the company had been noticeably hesitant to remove any of their premium apps, leaving several broken titles up for sale and fixing up a precious few of them each year. The *Chaos Rings* games had always been treated differently from other Square Enix originals on mobile, getting regularly fixed up alongside Square Enix's big-name releases while other apps languished. I suppose the clock finally ran out for *Chaos Rings*, however, as *Chaos Rings*, *Chaos Rings Omega*, and *Chaos Rings 2* were finally given the long kiss good-night. It's an unfortunate outcome for Square Enix's preeminent mobile-first RPG series, and bodes ill for any future endeavors along similar lines.

Darwin

How can you say the world is more important than four human lives!?

The original *Chaos Rings* had been a pretty big hit for Square Enix in 2010. The game performed well enough that the publisher green-lit two more games in the series. Word first came out about *Chaos Rings Omega* and *Chaos Rings 2* in an April 2011 issue of Japanese gaming magazine *Weekly Famitsu*. While that announcement included a number of details about *Chaos Rings Omega*, a sort of stand-alone expansion to the original game, the only mention of *Chaos Rings 2* came via a simple teaser ad. No details, no release date, just simple confirmation that the series would continue. Somewhat surprisingly, *Chaos Rings Omega* released only one month after its announcement, launching in May of 2011 to a mixed response.

Mere days after that game released, Square Enix released a teaser trailer for *Chaos Rings 2* that revealed some of the main characters and the loose premise of the story. It also showed off considerably more advanced graphics, replacing the largely pre-rendered 2D backdrops of the original with real-time 3D visuals. That trailer also revealed that the game would be fully voice-acted, with an array of well-known talents. Square Enix had tasted some success with the first game, and seemed to be throwing a lot more into the follow-up, a sharp contrast to the apparently meager budget

given to *Chaos Rings Omega*. More screenshots and news trickled out here and there throughout 2011 and early 2012, until one week in March when Square Enix did their usual thing and sort of unceremoniously announced *Chaos Rings 2* would launch that Thursday.

The game released on March 15th, 2012, around two years after the first game had launched. In many ways, it seemed to be a direct reply to criticisms of *Chaos Rings Omega*. There was no recycled graphical content, only one returning character, and the story was considerably longer than *Omega*'s brief campaign. Some adjustments had been made to the gameplay systems to distinguish it from the previous games, but it still retained some strong ties that helped identify it as a sequel. While its storyline was largely distinct from the tightly-bound narrative of the first two releases, it clearly took place in the same universe, and maintained the dark tone the first two games had established.

Now, I'm on record as thinking *Chaos Rings Omega* doesn't get the appreciation it deserves. While it was obviously made on a shoe-string budget, it embraces that and uses it to completely overturn the expectations

of the player. It's an excellent little trick, albeit one that clearly blew up in the game's face for anyone who didn't stick around for the reveal. In the face of that game's narrative courage, *Chaos Rings 2* comes off as being a little *too* safe. Oh, it's a suitably dark story, much darker than most JRPGs are willing to go, and there's the expected twist late in the game, but it almost feels afraid to betray the player's expectations. While it comes off like it's avoiding big risks, there are still some neat points to the story. There are some branching paths and a few different endings depending on a late-game choice. Your narrative decisions have an effect on the gameplay, which is also an interesting point.

Basically, in *Chaos Rings 2*, the main character is suddenly thrust into the role of world savior. Rather than the happy rah-rah that usually comes with that role, in *Chaos Rings 2* that job comes with a steep price. The main characters are told by a mysterious entity that to save the world, literal sacrifices must be made. The people to be sacrificed are meant to be those closest to the savior, lending the ritual a bittersweet quality. Nevertheless, the ritual has been successfully completed more than a thousand times before, mostly thanks to the strength of character of the chosen savior.

There's just one complication this time around. The chosen savior somehow manages to sacrifice himself to save the first person he was intended to kill. Thus, one of the sacrifices, a young man named Darwin, finds himself with the unenviable task of having to kill a group of people who aren't even necessarily connected to him, a lot that aren't particularly inclined to give up their lives for someone who they may not know at all.

You'll end up using just about every character as you play through the game, and each has their own special ability they can use to manipulate parts of levels in some fashion. This part of the game calls to mind another series from developer Media.Vision, the *Wild Arms* series. As you play through the game, characters will be killed off, cutting their ability off from further use. Darwin will gain access to many of their combat abilities, however, by equipping the Sopia each character leaves behind when they die. Similar to the previous games, enemies will also occasionally leave behind their essence, which can be equipped to give Darwin new skills. Yes, that name isn't even a little subtle. The absorbed human Sopias can also be brought out as special summoned monster attacks under certain conditions. This is one of the new parts of the battle system, along with the Limit Break-inspired Charge system.

Marie
Look at that waterfall...
And I don't hear the wind, either.
So time really has stopped...

Apart from those relatively minor changes, the battle system remains largely unchanged. You're still bringing teams of two into fights, still choosing whether to take each character's turn individually or team them up, and still working with the same circle of elemental weaknesses. It's important to keep the momentum going in your favor, and certain bosses can get awfully tricky. Square Enix and Media.Vision would make bigger changes with the next game in the series, but to be honest, the nuts and bolts of the combat in *Chaos Rings* were mostly fine from the start. It was the stuff *outside* of battles that needed a bit more attention, and it certainly got that here.

Chaos Rings 2 takes a similar stage-based approach as the first couple of games, but the backgrounds are much more detailed and beautiful here. The plot conjures an excuse for why nothing is moving, but even without much animation, it's hard to deny the craftsmanship that went into the new stages. The puzzles found in the previous games have been mostly ditched in favor of extremely simple obstacles that require the right character to overcome. On the whole, most of the areas are larger and feature more interesting branching designs than those found in the previous titles. Still a far cry from a traditional JRPG, but there's a clear improvement here that almost certainly

came from having a larger budget to work with.

Darwin
Who are you? And what are you talking about!?

In a strange way, I feel like Square Enix's increased confidence in the series ended up strangling a lot of what made it special, though. With more money on the line, Media.Vision couldn't afford to play things as riskily as they did in earlier titles. The additional rope lent to them also meant they could follow more conventional routes with the overall game design, which is both a good and bad thing. There's nothing especially clever going on in *Chaos Rings 2* in the manner of the converging narratives of *Chaos Rings* or the sucker-punch conclusion of *Omega*. It certainly has some things to say about religion, but honestly, that's a well-worn shoe for JRPGs. It doesn't help that the English version of the game had some of the point sanded off to avoid upsetting local religions.

Nevertheless, at the time of its release, *Chaos Rings 2* was one of the best original JRPGs the App Store had ever seen. It felt like Square Enix was really committing to the platform in a big way, as well as giving a clear message that *Chaos Rings* was an important franchise for them. I feel like *Chaos Rings 2* didn't live up to Square Enix's expectations, because it was years before

any sort of follow-up came together. When *Chaos Rings 3* finally did show, it might as well as have been given a new name for how much it had in common with the previous games. To me, that says that the publisher didn't have faith in continuing the original course of the *Chaos Rings* series.

Piu-Piu

"Why's that one piece of hair sticking up like that? Are you trying to make some kind of fashion statement? What a loser!"

Here's the thing, though: I agree with them. Not every game needs to be made into a series, and I think in a lot of respects, the *Chaos Rings* series had already started to run dry by *Chaos Rings 2*. Part of what makes *Chaos Rings 3* as incredible as it is comes from the developers not being afraid to completely jettison core principles of the series in favor of mixing things up. *Chaos Rings 2*, as good as it may be, straddles the line between being an experimental game with niche appeal and a big-budget safe sequel, resulting in a game that is probably a little too weird for the average player but also a little too bland for people who got into the other games.

Its identity crisis expresses itself in a number of ways. For example, the original games had a strong narrative reason for having parties of two characters. *Chaos Rings 2* sets something up but quickly waves it away, leaving you to wonder why pairs are so important in this particular setting.

While the world is filled with unusual characters and mysterious backgrounds, the main character is a disappointingly bland stock JRPG character, a particularly powerful letdown after Vieg and Olgar's antics in *Omega*. It's too bad, because the mechanical side of things is solid, with the difficulty balancing particularly strong here compared to previous efforts.

I find it somewhat amusing, in hindsight, that *Chaos Rings Omega* got saddled with the reputation of being a lazy follow-up. In my opinion, it was a considerably bolder effort than *Chaos Rings 2*, which seems quite content to just be a safe sequel all-around. Sure, *Chaos Rings 2* is a good game, and I wish Square Enix had kept it and the other games in the series on the App Store forever. I didn't have a bad time replaying it by any means. But in spite of the fact that it's probably the best of the first three games on paper, I think it comes out the weakest in practice. Certainly a good point for the series to take a short rest, at least.

That's just my take on *Chaos Rings 2*, though. What do you all think? You can let me know by commenting below, posting in the Official RPG Reload Club thread, or by tweeting me at @RPGReload. As for me, I'll be back next week

with a look at *A Dark Room* [($1.99)](), which is also the topic of this month's podcast. We love getting letters on the show, so please send some to [rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com](). Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *A Dark Room*